

What is Phonics?

Phonics is not reading, however, it is an essential skill for successful reading and produces results that are at least as successful as other approaches. Learning a coding system enables a pupil to sound out letters and letter combinations and arrive at the pronunciation of a word. In English some words defy phonic analysis and must be learned by sight. Since many of these words are the commonly used ones, a beginning reader needs to meet them frequently in well-planned, carefully structured graded reading books.

Phonics is not phonetics, which is a study of the sounds of spoken language. And it is not phonemic awareness, which is awareness that spoken words are composed of phonemes. It is a practical subject which breaks the letter-sound rules of the writing system into bite sized pieces easy for the pupil to learn. By concentrating on building up a store of sight words and phonic skills the child can sometimes quickly progress to reading books with stories that are relevant to their experiences.

Phonics relies on reading materials that reinforce phonics skills. Phonics uses context clues to assist with word identification, though mainly to confirm the meaning of a word after the word has been sounded-out. The choice of reading books is critical for phonic instruction. These books must have a constrained vocabulary of known phonic and sight words to allow the pupil to put skills into practice. An example of a phonics type of book is Dr Seuss' Hop on Pop. The first sentence is, "Up, pup. Pup is up." These sentences at first glance seem uninteresting, but Dr Seuss' illustrations and zany humour make him one of the world's best known children's authors.

Phonic instruction

Approach phonic instruction with the awareness that some words will always be learned as "sight words" (also called "outlaws"). All children do not need the same amount of instruction. The optimum amount of phonics instruction for each child is the minimum that will result in becoming an independent reader. However, much greater depth of phonic knowledge is required for spelling. Phonics can be taught from the beginning of a reading programme. For this reason the following instructions are primarily directed at teaching the beginner reader, not the remedial reader. The following information covers only the amount taught in the first two to three years of schooling.

Sequence of Instruction

- Beginning and Ending Consonant Sounds
- Short Vowels
- Digraphs and Consonant Blends
- Plurals
- Long Vowels
- Hard and soft c and g
- Long and short oo
- Effect of r on a preceding vowel
- Vowel Digraphs
- Syllabication

1. Beginning and Ending Consonants

Learning to handle the beginning consonants is the first step in the development of a coding system. A good exercise is the well known "I spy with my little eye

something beginning with the sound?” Use illustrations to show the beginning sound. End sounds are more difficult. In teaching, the end sound may be slightly elongated but not distorted. Exercises are useful for learning beginning and end sounds. For example, use pictures of “sun”, “leaf”, door. Ask children to point to the letter (out of f, k, m) that stand for the end sound in “leaf”. From the outset, stress the importance of printing. Use paper with ruled lines. Chalkboards are useful for practice.

Teach consonant and vowel letter-sounds in this sequence:

Day 1 s,m,p,n and a

Day 2 b,t,f,c, and i

Day 3 d,g,h,r and e

Day 4 j,l,k,v, and o (teach that c and k have the same sound)

Day 5 y,w,z and u

Day 6 q,x (q has two phonemes to make its sound /kw/; and x has three /eks/)

2. Short Vowels

Show pictures of “apple”, “egg”, “ink bottle”, “orange”, “umbrella”. Write the short vowels that go with each picture, under each picture.

a e i o u

The short vowel sounds are taught first. The long vowel sounds (e.g., the a in cake) are the same sounds as in the names of the vowel letters and are taught later. Children are ready now for three letter words with consonants and medial short vowels. Do not teach these as sounds in isolation, eg. **c – a – t** . Instead, use the phonogram approach. In a phonogram pattern, the vowel combines with another vowel and one or more consonants to form a rime. The rime is the part of the word that follows the initial consonant (s).For example, **-at** is a two-letter phonogram. To the children, call this the **-at** family.

This approach is recommended because vowel sounds can vary in sound from one word to another. Researchers have found that by teaching 37 high-frequency phonograms, pupils can read nearly 500 words. You can use word lists as recommended in The Book.

The -at family is demonstrated below by adding the magnetic ‘-at’ to the appropriate consonants as the pupil pronounces each word (see Smart Kids “Chunks” product).

b	-at	m	-at
c	↓	n	↓
d		p	
f		r	
g		s	
h		t	
j		v	
k		w	
l		z	

Similarly other families follow by combining consonants with the following phonograms¹:

am	ad	ag	an	ap			
et	en	eg	ed				
ip	im	ib	ig	ill			
ot	ob	og	od	oll	ox		
ub	ud	ug	up	um	un	ut	

The short vowels in four letter words can also be taught through phonograms:

-and, -ist, -est, -elt, -end, -ust, -ump, -ump, -ond.

e.g. **sand, hand, land, band, nest, rest, best**

At the same time you do this, teach the end-of-word sounds:

-ng, -ck, -nk

e. g. **bang, back, bank, sing, sick, sand**

3. Consonant Digraphs and Blends:

It is necessary to explain to pupils the difference between digraphs and consonant blends. With a consonant blend the two sounds are blended, that is, there are still two sounds (e.g., tr-, cl-) while in a digraph the two letters make a single sound (e.g., ch, sh, th, wh).

Consonant Digraphs

Use pictures of key words (e.g., ship, whale, chicken, thumb). Show children which picture goes with which word. Write the words under the pictures. Underline the first sounds (e.g., sh, th, ch, wh). Or ask child to think of words that start with these sounds.

ship	thumb	chick	whale
sh	th	ch	wh

The pictures can be displayed on the floor, or on a magnetic chalk-board. Here is **sh** as an example, used at the beginning and at the end of words:

sh	ip	di	sh
↓	op	fi	↓
	up	wi	
	in	sa	
	ot	ma	
	ell	ru	

Here the teacher will be aware of later additions

tch ph gh,

and the three sounds of **ch**, though ch as in chair is by far the most common and should be the only one taught to young children. Also be sure to teach the voiced sound of **th**, which is the more frequent sound (e.g., th as in them) and its voiceless sound (e.g., th as in think).

¹ The phonogram is a closed syllable which begins with a vowel and which produces a single speech sound

Teach initial sounds in this order: sh, ch, th,wh,gh
Teach final sounds –ng, -ck, -sh

Consonant Blends (also called Clusters)

Teach the blends in the following order:

Two letter blends

r -clusters fr, cr, br, gr, dr, pr, tr
l -clusters gl, fl, bl, sl, pl, cl
s -clusters sk, sp, sn, sw, sc, st, sm
t clusters tw

Three letter blends

spl, str, spr, squ

Digraphs combined with another letter

thr, shr, sch, chr

For beginning pupils teaching is confined to the two letter blends. For example, children can be show a picture of a “clock” and asked to choose which consonant blend represents the first two phonemes in “clock” (e.g., give a choice of “cl”, “gr”, “sc”). Use also consonant blends cards. And plastic letters.

Some examples of blends to illustrate:

t	op	r	am	l	ap	l	ock
	↓		↓		↓		↓
r		r		n		l	
r		l		r		l	
r		l		l		t	

4. Plurals in s and es

There is a rule which says, “es comes after s, ss, x, ch, sh, and tch”

Make it simple by clapping to hear the syllables.

cats has one syllable: add s to **cat**

foxes has two syllables: add es to fox

5. Long Vowels

The long vowels are the letter names. So far only short vowels have been involved. Moving to the long vowels needs careful preparation. Pupils must hear the different sounds of the long and short vowels. You could use different colours for the

long and short vowels, or a symbol above the vowel (macron and breve) to indicate either its short or long sound.

(a) Silent e (also called magic e)

With magnetic letters pupils add **e** to short vowel words and change the breve mark to the macron, indicating that the vowel is now long. Thus prepared ‘silent e’ becomes a real adventure.

Examples:

mat	mate	hop	hope
rat	rate	rob	robe
hid	hide	cub	cube
rip	ripe	tub	tube
bit	bite	cut	cute
pet	Pete		

Now combining digraphs, blends and silent **e**, pupils can find real achievement in sounding out words like:

complete, athlete, concrete

(b) Vowel digraphs - The multiple spellings of long vowels

ai, ay, oa, oe, ow, ee, ea, ie, ue, ew.

The same vowel sound can be spelled in a number of different ways. The chart below shows some of the common spellings of each of the vowel sounds. It must be admitted that the long vowel sounds, and their various spellings, present the greatest difficulty. For example, we have **sail, sale**

road rode
meet meat

For example:

a	a/e	ai	ay
mat	mate	rain	day
trap	plate	snail	play

e	e/e	ea	ee
pet	Pete	seat	tree
bed	here	teach	sheep

i	i/e	ie	y
big	like	pie	my
hill	bite	tie	why

o	o/e	oa	oe	ow
not	home	boat	toe	tow
dog	stone	road	goes	snow

u	u/e	ue	ew
cut	cute	due	new
cup	tune	cue	few

Pupils can find it exciting to discover they can now spell even long words like.

continue **rescue** **Tuesday** **avenue**

Other long vowel sounds can be learned as phonograms:

no **go** **so**
me **be** **he** **we** **she**
old **bold** **cold** **sold** **hold**

Teach the **vowel digraphs** in this sequence, with one pattern for one sound:

One-sound

ai, ee, oa, oy, aw, ew

ay, oi, au

Two sounds:

Ea, oo, ou, ow, ei

Helpful phonics rules for short and long vowel sounds

Here are some useful rules to guide your teaching. Pupils may not need to know them word for word, but they should be aware that there are spelling patterns to follow.

Rule 1. After a short vowel **ck**. After a long vowel with silent **e**, **k** only.

back **bake**
tack **take**
snack **snake**

Rule 2. After a short vowel double the consonant before adding the suffix.
After a long vowel with a silent **e** drop the **e** and add the suffix.

Adding the suffixes **ing** and **ed**:

hop **hopping** **hopped**
hope **hoping** **hoped**

Rule 3. At the end of a word the digraph **ch** becomes **tch** after a short vowel

catch **fetch** **ditch** **notch** **Dutch**

The exceptions are

Much, such, rich, which

6. Hard and Soft C and G

c has the hard sound of **k** in **cat, cage** and **can**.

c has the soft sound of **s** in **city, cent** and **mice**.

Phonograms are helpful:

face **race** **place** **rice** **mice** **nice**

g has the hard sound of **g** in **gate, goat, dog, gum** (if followed by a,o,u).

g has the soft sound of **j** in **gym, gem, giant** (if followed by e, i).

At the end of a word the **j** sound is written **dge** as in **judge** and **bridge** and **ge** following **n** or **r** as in **orange** , **large**.

7. Effect of r on a preceding Vowel

ar and **or** present no problems. For most people **er**, **ir** and **ur** have the same sound and are more difficult.

10. Syllabication

Teach children that each syllable has a vowel. When they come to a long word, they should look for the vowels. A good idea is to underline the vowels. The syllable will include the vowel and one or more consonants before the vowel, and sometimes after it. For example, the word “window” has two vowels. Sometimes it helps to draw a line just after the vowel, as in “win/dow”. Then sound out each syllable one after the other. If a word ends in an e, this may be a silent e. Say that the silent e may not indicate another syllable, since it has no sound (e.g., “cho/co/late”). There are exceptions to this silent e rule, though (e.g., “ter/rib/le”)

Spelling

Give the pupil sentences to write that have phonic patterns. Be sure that every mistake the pupil makes is corrected. Give the pupil the correct answers. Let the pupil make the corrections.

Source: Nicholson, T. (2000). Reading the writing on the wall. Palmerston: Dunmore Press.